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Daft Punk's Thomas Bangalter Talks About Making Music for Art Projects and Robot Life as Performance

**BY ANDY BATTAGLIA**  June 8, 2026 11:41am

Thomas Bangalter.

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Thomas Bangalter made a name for himself as one half of the French electronic-music duo Daft Punk starting from the early 1990s through the group's dissolution in 2021. A name but definitely not a face—he and his partner, Guy-Manuel de Homem-Christo, famously presented themselves as robots replete with all-concealing mechanistic helmets and gloves.

After Daft Punk's rise from underground dance music heroes to chart-topping pop insurgents, Bangalter followed different muses in different directions. In 2022, he made music for a ballet called *Mythologies* that was issued as an album a year later. In 2023, he worked on *Chiroptera*, an ambitious performance project with artist JR and choreographer Damien Jalet at the Place de l'Opera in Paris. In 2025, he played a [surprise DJ set \(https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/daft-punks-thomas-bangalter-pompidou-dj-set-1234758969/\)](https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/daft-punks-thomas-bangalter-pompidou-dj-set-1234758969/) to mark the closing of Centre Pompidou for five years of renovation.

Last week, Bangalter released *Mirage*, an album of minimal electronic music he made for another ballet with Damien Jalet, in collaboration with visual artist Kohei Nawa. And new sound work of his features in *La Caverne du Pont Neuf*, a public art installation in Paris for which JR wrapped the oldest bridge in Paris in a faux-rocky-looking fabric in tribute to a previous artwork by Christo and Jeanne-Claude. (The work was scheduled to open officially last week but has been **delayed** (<https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/jr-christo-wrapped-bridge-paris-1234788242/>) after damage from a recent storm is assessed, with a new opening date to be set soon.) On June 8, he will appear at the Tribeca Festival in New York to discuss a 20th-anniversary remaster of the Daft Punk film *Electroma*. And later this month he will present an rave-minded installation as part of Art Basel in Switzerland.

From his Paris studio, *ARTnews* spoke to Bangalter about *Mirage*, his work in Paris, and how—especially in retrospect—Daft Punk has come to seem more and more like a sustained performance art project that continues to evolve.

When did you first become aware of art as something distinct from music? How far back does that go?

I was based in an artistic family. My mother was a dancer for the first national contemporary dance company in France in the late '60s, working with a lot of avant-garde music, and my father is a composer and producer of pop music. So I was brought up in a very rich and inspiring art-based environment. And also just living in Paris: I was born and raised in Montmartre and went every week to the Centre Pompidou library. That was my pre-internet encyclopedia, going through microfilms and doing research.

I had a relationship with art in every form, especially Pop art. Guy-Manuel de Homem-Christo, who I did Daft Punk with, and I were obsessed with Andy Warhol, the Velvet Underground, and the Factory—and the idea of a kind of integration between the avant-garde and popular culture. But I must say that it was in fact my relationship with music that was not so central. I always thought I ended up almost accidentally becoming a musician. The way I was drawn to it was that I thought it was an interesting vector and an opportunity to experiment with unconventional forms. I wouldn't have said that at the beginning, because I didn't want to spoil the process, but when I reflect on how Daft Punk operated as a project, it was in some sense performance art—an act of blurring the lines with the robot entities between fiction and reality.

And that's what I am more and more interested in today. I still use music as a central anchor point to start something, but I really like the idea of exploring forms that are on the margins of categories that could be well-defined.

What about music in particular made it more receptive to experimentation than other mediums?

My relationship to music has evolved a lot. When I was 18 I wanted to make films. I wanted to leave Paris and go to NYU, fantasizing about the idea of finding an avant-garde scene that was truly experimental. And completely by accident I stumbled upon the nascent beginning of the electronic house music scene in France and I was like, "Wow, there is something here that can be a starting point of something..." There was not an overwhelming quantity of artistic things going on but rather a premise or an intersection of circumstances to try to inject pop-culture with something.

Music is quite a mystical art form in the way it's not figurative and has hypnotic and addictive aspects that I liked. I realized that my favorite film I had maybe seen maybe 15 or 20 times, my favorite book I had read maybe four or five times, and then a piece of music that I loved I could listen to it like 1,000 or 2,000 or 3,000 times. It can take on a conditioning relationship. A painting could probably be the same if you own it, but [otherwise] it's hard to experience in the same way. It felt like music could be the soundtrack of a series of experiments that could gravitate around different processes.

At the Factory, Andy Warhol would ask Paul Morrissey to make movies while he supervised, and then the Velvet Underground would make music and hide their faces in political anonymous aspects. [With Daft Punk] we began to use techniques from movie-magic craft and special-effects shops to transform and create the robot personas and, again, push them in different directions to blur the line between fiction and reality. The

robots became an act that lasted for 25 years, where we just stayed in character and it basically created its own self-feeding mythology. The mystique and the mystery created a kind of feedback loop. I've always liked the idea of combining things, and I'm fortunate to still have the opportunity after the Daft Punk adventure to explore different forms and work on projects that are hard to classify or put into a category.



For *Mirage*, how did your involvement with choreographer Damien Jalet and artist Kohei Nawa begin? And how did you think about what you wanted to do sonically for the project?

All of my recent strings of projects have been happening very organically. I met Damien through JR, and we worked on *Chiroptera*, which was a ballet we did with 154 dancers on the facade of the Place de l'Opera. I really got along with Damien, and he suggested working on another project together. Damien had been introduced to Kohei Nawa by Ryuichi Sakamoto and they had started to do ballet pieces together that were interestingly at the margin between performance art and art installation and choreography. It was already hard to classify or give a proper definition, and they had this new project that they were workshoping in Japan. Damien would go to Kohei's studio every few months to try things, almost like a cabinet of wonders. It reminded me a lot of some special effects shops in the Valley [in California] where they are trying things to put in movies.

Gradually, this ballet that was illusion-based—it's in the title itself—started to grow and form, and I approached it as a way to try to put the illusions and the tableaux that were taking shape into sound. I liked more and more the idea of not having a strict definition between how I approached it as sound or as music. I had started to do that with Gaspar Noe: I made the score for his film *Irreversible*, and when he asked me for music for *Enter the Void*, I ended up creating six hours of sound design that I gave him. It was more like sound matter than a score by a composer, raw data that he could edit in. Finding the line between where sound ends and music begins is a good exploration, and that was the process for *Mirage*.

Did you have any reference points? The press release mentions the avant-garde composer Iannis Xenakis...

The reference to Xenakis is linked to some of the tools he designed. He started to draw orchestral scores, with clusters and lines, and used sheet music in very unconventional way for an orchestra to then play those lines and glissandi. In the '80s he created software to make electronic music graphically, and that's the way that the music for *Mirage* was made. The relationship is with the idea of process and tools and the way a thing is made when approached in a geometric, graphic, and very visceral way. Some of

the sounds are almost like Jackson Pollock clouds or dots or points that go through harmonic filters and microtonal processing.

After Daft Punk, initially I stopped making any kind of electronic music and worked on this orchestral project *Mythologies* [for which] I spent two years learning about orchestration. The big question for me at that point was existential: Could I have been an artist without technology? Was I just a product of my relationship with machines—synthesizers and drum machines and computers? It was almost like a test to see if I could go back only to tools that were available 250 years ago and still be a musician or composer.

I also wanted to stop programming so I could have a more spontaneous relationship with the music-making process, and that's where the use of graphic tools came in. I actually had been learning about them and using them for 20 years, but it was only in the last four or five years that I started to realize that's the way I feel more drawn to and excited to create electronic music. Because it's very visceral it doesn't require theorizing or any kind of prompting or expression of an idea. When I learned about orchestration, I didn't want to learn harmony or harmonic theory, because I want to have a relationship with instruments on a more primal level than an intellectual one.



JR, *La Caverne du Pont Neuf*, 2026.

PHOTO ÉLÉA JEANNE SCHMITTER/©2026 ATELIER JR

How did the *La Caverne du Pont Neuf* project with JR in Paris come about?

JR came back to me and saying that—with Vladimir Yavachev, Christo's nephew—he was contemplating an homage on the Pont Neuf bridge and extending the idea of the cavern that we had worked on for *Chiroptera*. It's a trompe l'oeil of the entrance of a cavern, and for this project the rock formation is on the bridge. JR asked me to think about the sonic aspect of it, and I'm a huge Christo fan. I was 11 years old when I saw *The Pont Neuf Wrapped* in Paris, and it was the most inspiring and magical art piece I'd ever seen. I love it because there is no market for it. One thing I don't like about the art world is the speculative aspect of the trade. That's why I love Land art and Christo's work: the fact that the pieces are basically not for sale.



Christo and Jeanne-Claude: *The Pont Neuf Wrapped*, 1975-85.

PHOTO WOLFGANG VOLZ/©1985 CHRISTO + WOLFGANG VOLZ

JR explained that his work would be an inflatable structure—it was going to be air, an illusion—and for that I didn't want to do any "music." I don't like the idea of putting music in a public space, imposing music as an obligation on the public—that is not something I would want to be a part of. I remembered the nylon polyamide fabric that Christo had chosen and the purity of wrapping the bridge with just one thing, so my initial pitch to JR was that I wanted to wrap the bridge with a nine-hertz frequency, just a sine wave, almost nothing, just a tone. When we started to do some testing, I realized that was not really working because it was very electronic and it didn't feel natural. But overall I realized my goal was to do something again between sound and music, without making any kind of distinction. The idea was to wrap the bridge with just one sonic fabric that would not have any sense of time. It's a little bit like *Mirage* in that it was inspired by nature sounds like crackling fire or a flowing river—things that are repetitive but not serial, with infinite repetition that is never the same. My biggest reference point is Niagara Falls or something like that, where it's an intrusion of something different in the public space that is also monumental. My goal was to add a little bit weight to something that is a very airy because it's inflated.

How is the sound transmitted. Is it through a speaker array?

The structure is made of different layers. There's an inflatable frame, and then there's the printed material, and then inside there's another inflatable corridor, and then a sound and amplification system throughout. A big part of the overall sound is the motor for the inflation and the vacuum; I put my sound around it so you don't know where it comes from—it can feel like it's coming from the structure itself, rather than an amplification system, almost like an oil rig at sea. I didn't go into a studio to make sound to play back through a system. We went to a big airport warehouse with the equipment and I tried to stimulate that equipment sonically to see how it would react in the most primal, minimal way. It's almost like the way you could have an LED screen that can one billion colors and you only show white. Here we have a very elaborate sound system, but we are putting very few frequencies through it. When Christo and Jeanne-Claude wrapped the bridge, it was just one layer of fabric telling the story. It was very minimal—minimalism and also maximalism in terms of scale. That's what we are trying to do.

Do you know Max Neuhaus's *Times Square* (<https://www.diaart.org/visit/visit-our-locations-sites/max-neuhaus-times-square>)? It's a sound-art piece created in 1977 and supported by the Dia Art Foundation, which oversees Land art works like *The Lightning Field* and *Spiral Jetty*. It's basically a speaker system installed underneath a sidewalk grate on Broadway between 45th and 46th Streets—you can't see anything, there's no sign or anything to identify the piece, and it's a subtle, rumbling drone that most people don't even know is there...

I don't know it but that's it! It's very similar to my approach here. It's something that changes perception, but you really notice it more when it's off than when it's on.

Like when your refrigerator stops making a sound and you only really hear it retroactively?

Exactly. I like the idea of speakers that are hidden; at low frequencies, it's just the membrane of the speakers vibrating and actually pushing the air. There's air in *La Caverne du Pont Neuf* that makes it inflatable and air emanating [with sound], creating a kind of magnetic field around the structure. It gives it a little bit more force and an eerie effect to something that is very ephemeral.

You mentioned earlier having come to think of Daft Punk as something like a performance art project. Were you conscious of that at the time, or is it something you've come to realize more in retrospect?

I was conscious of it. The most interesting thing was how the line between fiction and reality was blurred, but it's probably because of the music industry. In the movie industry, you can be an actor and live an everyday life—then you go to the Academy Awards or something like that and there's a separation. In the music industry, for some reason, people who are superstars are superstars 24 hours a day. There's not so much fiction [in contrast to] reality. With the robots, it was like a science-fiction film, but there was no camera and we interacted with things. For example, we did the music for Disney's *Tron*:

Legacy and walked the red carpet as robots. We had in-ear monitors for someone with visibility and a walkie-talkie to tell us “You can make a right here, now a left...” Everything was choreographed, but it was hard. In scenes in *Star Wars*, the director was probably cutting every three minutes, and the actors would remove their helmets and take a sip of water. If there was a problem, they could just do it again. But being at the Grammys with Stevie Wonder, there’s no second take. There was this thing that was completely organized and it became real because of that. It was an act we put together for almost 20 years and had to stay in character. It was a lot of fun—and very interesting how the process becomes like an art presentation.



Daft Punk at the Grammys in 2014.
GETTY IMAGES

I saw Daft Punk play at the minor-league baseball stadium in Coney Island in 2007 and my memories are really like film, totally cinematic. I remember the ushers in the stadium dancing and everyone in every capacity just completely freaking out.

It’s interesting you’re saying that because that’s the way that show was designed. I never thought about what the expectations of the audience at [any given] moment. The way that show was designed to feel like being in a science-fiction film. In some way the show was less about what was on the stage, so *everything* as part of the show—including your own experience and the experience of the people around you. That’s something I miss sometimes. I feel like art pieces are so circumscribed and there are lines around everything. I want full experiences with surprises and accidents and discovering something rather than just like arriving at the museum and looking at something in a familiar environment.